COMPASSION TO THE CHILDREN OF CALAMITY:

A

SERMON,

PREACHED BEFORE

THE SOCIETY ESTABLISHED IN LEITH, FOR THE RELIEF OF THE DESTITUTE SICK,

IN THE KIRKGATE MEETING-HOUSE,

On Sabbath, Sept. 22. 1799.

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COMPASSION TO THE CHILDREN OF CALAMITY:

A

SERMON.

MAT. XXV. 36.

I WAS SICK, AND YE VISITED ME.

THE lot of man is perpetually expoſed to new perplexities. A ſettled ſtate cannot be ſecured. Many changes intervene between the commencement and the cloſe of a mortal courſe. Every man, at one time or other, is made a mourner.

It is preſumption to ſpeak ſo proudly of independence and proſperity, as if our enjoyments could be perpetuated, an undeſired change were never to ariſe, or the tender offices of friendſhip were never to be needed. As we have not yet quitted life, we cannot be indifferent to the

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woes of the world. We cannot be certain, that the miſeries which humble others to-day, may not be our own to-morrow. We cannot ceaſe to feel the infirmities and afflictions of the partakers of our own fleſh. Though the cup of poverty ſhould never be put into our hand, though we ſhould never need to receive the viſits of love we have given, yet there is ſtill a pleaſure in active compaſſion, which is its own reward.

It is for a pious purpoſe, that a principle of ſympathy is infuſed into our nature, and kindly cheriſhed by the powerful influence of our religion. The child of adverſity is furniſhed by it, with an advocate in every breaſt. Internal tenderneſs of heart pleads more powerfully in favour of the afflicted, than all the circumſtances of external calamity. If it were not for the experience, the force, the exerciſe of compaſſion, we cannot conceive how the rich could diſpoſe, with advantage, of a conſiderable portion of their ſuperfluous wealth, or by what other channel the poor could come to have a kind of regular ſupply.

The duty of ſoothing the diſtreſſed, derives an honour and a dignity from the once elevated

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rank, or the preſent celebrated connections of the perſons whom we relieve. Let the affluent be reduced, let them ſolicit our aid, they meet with more of the gifts of love, and a liberality more enlarged, than would be diſplayed to people who had never occupied a high condition. We are ready to ſuppoſe, we would receive more perſonal reſpect, than give pity, on being called to viſit a potentate, either reduced by diſaſter, or ſick unto death.

But our ſubject carries this point to the higheſt pitch. Chriſt and his children are repreſented to be ſo completely one, their intereſts ſo effectually united, that he looks upon himſelf as received, regarded, glorified, when they are acknowledged, loved, and relieved. He marks all the inſtances of affection with which his ſaints are loaded, and keeps them, in eternal record, as ſo many ſervices done on his own account to his own perſon. It muſt, of courſe, be more honourable to miniſter to the Mediator, perſonated by his people, than to ſhew mercy to any diſtreſſed prince, or to entertain any holy angel. We need not be informed, that with more than mortal lips, on a nobler occaſion than that of exerciſing charity, and before a larger audience

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than what compoſes any earthly aſſembly, the language of our text ſhall be glorioufly announced, " I was ſick, and ye viſited me."

There are three general points that I mean to illuſtrate: the condition of Chriſtians; the compaſſion they claim; and the obligations that bind us to ſhew to a holy kindred, placed amidſt the moſt pitiable circumſtances, all the feelings of genuine compaſſion.

It is not intended, in what follows, to confine our views to that particular kind of diſtreſs, nor to that ſpecies of attention which goes by the names of ſickneſs and viſitation. I mean to take a wider range, to include almoſt all the adverſities with which man is viſited, and the chief of the ſprings of joy with which he can be comforted.

The univerſal Judge is ſuppoſed to utter the words of the paſſage I have ſelected; yet as the great body of believers are often ſick, deſirous of being viſited, and as Jeſus ſpeaks in the name of his ſaints, the language well becomes the lips of every Chriſtian. The ſorrowful diſciple may rejoice in the multitude of favours already received from the liberality of the righteous, and

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may reckon his former experience, an encouragement to future hope.

I. The condition of Chriſtians is moſt diſtreſsful.

1. Sickneſs is juſtly deſerved.

To ſuppoſe that fallen man is poſſeſſed of inherent innocence, and an entire ſtranger to all evil, is a doctrine too obviouſly falſe to be admitted. The golden age of primeval glory is for ever gone. The crown fell from our head, and a long train of woes hath followed. Sorrow is inſeparable from ſinfulneſs; equality, relative to original guilt, produces in all a liableneſs to the inroads of affliction.

Men may inflict puniſhment for crimes, with which the arreſted individuals may not be chargeable. We never find God, however, contending with his creatures, without a cauſe; all his corrections may be traced to the many offences which they have committed. The Father of mercies chaſtens none of his children but thoſe who have counteracted his commands; neither, is he ſeen exerciſing the rod for his own pleaſure, but for their profit. The Governor among the nations permits the penalty

nalty of his law to be executed upon none of his ſubjects, but thoſe who have careleſsly or contemptuouſly violated the precept. The apple of apoſtaſy cannot be eaten without involving men in all the evils of adverſity. The offence of one proved the affliction of all. "Sin "entered into the world, and death by ſin, ſo "death hath paſſed upon all men, becauſe all "have ſinned *."

There are various diſeaſes incident to men, of which the immediate cauſe is not known. "We "cannot account for them, (as the phraſe is), "and aſcribe them to accident." But the more diſtant remote cauſe can eaſily be aſcertained, becauſe, without controverſy, all may be traced to a forbidden tree. We are neither to aſcribe the loſs of innocence, the ſource of all our woe, to any ſuppoſed weakneſs in God, or to the active wiles of Satan, but to the wilful obſtinate wickedneſs of man. Man is the ſole author of his own miſery; he alone hath digged the pit into which he hath fallen; he hath made his life to be an eternal war with ſucceſſive woes. Were the rod ever ſo heavy, or confinement ever ſo long; were age left without ſolace, ſickneſs

* Rom. v. 12.

neſs without alleviation, or infirmity without ſupport, we would be receiving no more than a juſt meaſure, reaping the fruit of our own ways.

2. Sickneſs is univerſally experienced.

There is none ſo highly favoured, as never to be called to taſte the bitterneſs of trouble. If one could be diſcovered on earth, who did not deſerve the name of a ſinner, if one could be ſeen without ſpot or wrinkle, we might ſuppoſe ſo pure a character would be exempted. But no mere man, guiltleſs and undefiled, is to be found.

The univerſality of affliction, is no new doctrine, but one we have had from the beginning. Human nature hath been completely corrupted; whenever it is born, it is liable to be perſecuted, forſaken, caſt down, deſtroyed. The full flood of afflictions hath overwhelmed the whole world. Every page of the ſacred volume, unites with the voice of experience, in atteſting the ſolemn truth. There is a chaſtiſement of which *all* are partakers. In Adam *all* die. I do not contend that every perſon muſt be made the picture of deſpair, but every generation is a group of depraved beings, always beſet by many miſeries.

No age is free. The infant and the hoary head may be laid on the ſame bed of languiſhing, equally removed beyond the hope of recovery. An Abijah is not exempted from woes, any more than an Abraham. The flower withers, as well as the wide-ſpreading tree. The cradle contains many ſorrowful children, who have not ſinned after the ſimilitude of Adam's tranſgreſſion, while the couch holds multitudes, farther advanced in life, leſs free from ſin, more actively vicious.

No condition is ſo privileged, as never to be compelled to partake of the bitter fruits of affliction. Where is the perſon, who, elevated by earthly highneſs, will hazard a ſcornful ſmile at the ſhaking of the rod? who, depreſſed by lowneſs of place, needs to be conſtrained to ſink under the weight of ſorrow? It is equally wrong to deſpiſe the chaſtening of the Lord, and to faint when rebuked of him. But be aſſured, ſickneſs neither fears to attack the higheſt, nor ſuffers itſelf, from love, to overlook the loweſt. The rod levels all ranks. It places, on the ſame humble foundation, miniſters and people, magiſtrates and ſubjects, the rich and the poor, the wiſe and the fooliſh, the Indian idolater and the

the European believer, the diſciple of Confucius and the follower of Chriſt. A Solomon has his ſorrows, no leſs than a Lazarus his ſores. The ſplendours of a palace can no more ſhelter a man from the blaſts of adverſity, than the meaner accommodations of the pooreſt cottage.

There may be a contagion in ſickneſs, as in ſin, equally extended, equally mournful. If it is a true maxim, "evil communications corrupt "good manners," it is not leſs true, that a careleſs, yet cloſe intercourſe with infectious diſeaſes, haſtens the ſickneſs or diſſolution of multitudes. We do not deem it neceſſary, however, to have recourſe to the ravages of a peſtilential fever, or the effects of famine, the horrors of war, or the diſtreſſes of an inhoſpitable climate, to prove that adverſity is an univerſal evil. If events take their ordinary courſe only, proof will be amply afforded; neither can we prevent drops of gall from being infuſed into our own cup. Affliction is unto all, upon all, without the ſmalleſt reſpect of perſons. How widely ſpread is human woe!

3. Sickneſs may have a fatal termination.

An eternity of exiſtence on earth, is an enjoyment that hath been always unknown. There never

never was an individual, who could affirm with truth, "I can live always." We cannot claim a life without bounds or limits. No man lives longer than is neceſſary to permit him to fill up the meaſure of his iniquity, or to prepare his perſon for the kingdom of glory. A Methuſelah may ſurvive the reſt of mankind, outliving all his cotemporaries, beholding ages and generations buried, yet he alſo muſt mingle with the aſhes of his fathers.

There is no ſecurity given, when ſickneſs commences, that it ſhall not carry a man to his coffin. The beginning may be attended by no ſymptoms of danger; the latter end may be accompanied by all the miſerable marks of a rapid diſſolution. It is by a ſilent proceſs, that ſickneſs wears out mortal fleſh, covering a man, ſometimes more expeditiouſly, ſometimes more ſlowly, with the mantle of death.

Trouble does not ſuſpend its attacks, till men have grown up to maturity, or been able to have all their earthly affairs completely arranged. The headleſs youth is equally in danger of being overtaken by adverſity, with the buſybody who is entangled in the concerns of the world. How many have been conſumed by wrath,

wrath, before they have been convinced of their wickedneſs! What multitudes have been daſhed in pieces, like a potter's veſſel, without the previous honour of having been made new creatures!

The laſt enemy is the common, the mortal foe of mankind, renewing his hoſtilities againſt human nature, with re-iterated energy, till his end is accompliſhed. The earthly houſe of our tabernacle, cannot always ſucceſsfully reſiſt the repeated aſſaults of ſorrow, to which it hath been deſtined to ſubmit. Death is the portion of the cup of every individual; a cup that God mingles, and ſinners merit! a cup we cannot avoid drinking, but of which we cannot partake more than once!

II. The compaſſion manifeſted to Chriſtians, amidſt all the anxieties of a ſorrowful ſituation, muſt be kind, active, and conſtant.

1. We muſt viſit the ignorant with good advice.

There is room enough every where for the merciful labours of holy love, and of true wiſdom. What is the moſt of the world, but a wild dreary waſte, where knowledge hath never

ver entered, where the mind hath never been cultivated, where men are little better than beaſts before God? What are the late diſcoveries, made in different regions, but diſcoveries of the ignorance and immoralities with which the earth is afflicted? Whether we viſit continents or iſlands, we meet with many nations who know nothing of the nature of God, or the grace of Chriſt, the neceſſity of regeneration, or the hope of glory. There will be found among them as great a collection of vices, compreſſed within a few years, as might have been more than ſufficient for many ages. If we examine the conduct of their blinded chiefs, we are unable to determine, whether we ſhould moſt compaſſionate their condition, or abominate their pollutions. They have not yet got the length of being babes in knowledge, having never learned the rudiments of religion. Would to heaven! many ſpiritual lamps may be ordained, for the nations of the unenlightened, to guide their feet into the way of peace!

We need not travel, however, to foreign lands, to meet with men whoſe minds are buried amidſt clouds, darkneſs, and tempeſt. The examples

examples of extreme ignorance, found in our own country, are more numerous and common than the moſt imagine. How unhappy to ſtumble upon not a few, as unacquainted with Chriſt, the friend of ſinners, and the way to the Father, as if they had been born in Otaheite or China? Are there not too many, who, in knowledge and underſtanding, are children, but in malice and miſchief, are men? How oppreſſing to the heart, to think of a human being, perhaps on the verge of the grave too, unilluminated, unſanctified, unpoliſhed by the power of grace! It is uſeleſs to attribute the want of knowledge to the loſs or negligence of parents, to the enticements or examples of a brutiſh folly, becauſe the chief blame will recoil upon their own heads. If they were not culpably careleſs about their beſt, their higheſt intereſts, the opportunities of acquiring religious information, plentifully abounding every where, would be zealouſly embraced. But it deſerves to be remembered, that wherever the love of ignorance reigns, the worſt effects will follow. Ignorance is the ſickneſs of the underſtanding: ignorance opens the road to unbelief: ignorance ſlew Immanuel: ignorance builds idolatrous altars to

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an unknown God. Let wiſdom ſay to the wanderer, "Come, eat of my bread, and drink of "the wine that I have mingled." Let piety have compaſſion on the ignorant, and on them that are out of the way.

The people who have appropriated large treaſures of the beſt information, ſtill complain of a portion of ignorance. Perhaps they would be glad to be furniſhed with clearer views of the doctrines of Chriſtianity: perhaps they would wiſh to be helped to decide, with greater accuracy, on their own ſpiritual condition. Should they be totally overlooked? ſhould not attempts be made to cauſe their pale caſt of thought to be changed? If an Apollos required an adviſer, muſt we not ſuppoſe, many a private Chriſtian requires much more to be inſtructed in the way of God more perfectly.

2. We muſt viſit the diſconſolate with ſuitable conſolations.

The comforts of Chriſtians, be what they will, cannot be always continued. We flatter ourſelves, that our ſtrong mountain ſhall never be moved, and ſhrink at the idea of the ſmalleſt change. We enter on the career of life, with little foreview of future afflictions; but we inhabit

bit no conſecrated ground, unincumbered by crimes, alterations or calamities.

It is truly mournful to ſurvey the train of fiery trials, with which the pure in heart are environed, and agonized. Piety in diſtreſs, exhibits a melancholy picture, never ceaſing to awaken all the tender compaſſions of the Chriſtian world.

Suppoſe a lover of God, deprived of the light of his Father's face. He conſiders the affliction as the heavieſt ever experienced, pouring the bittereſt woes into his grieved mind. It is now no more with him as in months paſt, when the candle of the Lord ſhined upon his head. Dejection reigns with unreſiſted ſway. "He goes "backwards and forwards to the devotions of "the ſanctuary, or the exerciſes of the cloſet, "exclaiming, Where is my God? O that I "knew where I might find him, I would come "even to his ſeat! The marrow of my ſpiritual "ſtate is turned into wormwood and gall. I "have eaten aſhes like bread, and mingled my "drink with weeping, becauſe of thine indig-"nation, O Lord, becauſe thou haſt lift me up, "and caſt me down." The caſe demands compaſſion, the perſon needs to be comforted. The

loſs of a ſenſe of divine love, is undoubtedly great, yet it may be graciouſly, perhaps ſpeedily repaired. The Sun of righteouſneſs may be deemed to be concealed amidſt the darkeſt clouds; but he will, he muſt ariſe again, with healing under his wings. Admitting that the favour of heaven is withdrawn, a ſpiritual ſtate cannot be affected or forfeited. The comforts of a reconciled countenance, are no ſooner denied, than the ſaint is thrown into a ſtate of ſpiritual ſickneſs; a ſickneſs that deprives him of ſociety by day, and of ſleep by night; a ſickneſs that is cauſed, and muſt be relieved by an unſeen Saviour; a ſickneſs, however, that is not unto death, but for the glory of God.

Think of a pious diſciple, purſued by the power of Satan, overtaken, tempted, and ſet a trembling. The fangs of an infernal foe are as hard to be extracted, as they are difficult to be endured. Stung by the old ſerpent, the poor tempted man, diſmayed, enchained, oppreſſed, loſes all reliſh for daily bread, or ſpiritual manna. If the ruthleſs tyrant of the dark regions, in the greatneſs of his rage, ſhould provoke him to curſe God, or to be an enemy to his own life, to mingle with the enemies of Chriſt,

Chriſt, or to abandon religion, his ſoul is dreadfully depreſſed. Snares and terrors threaten to involve him in diſtraction and deſpair. A mind tortured to madneſs by the extremity of temptation, cannot eaſily recover the ſhock, and may haſtily look on exiſtence as a burden, rather than a bleſſing. We can adminiſter the beſt conſiderations, as grounds of ſtrongeſt comfort. The man is not left alone, neither can he be undone. Apollyon may enter in among the ſaints, as Judas did among the twelve; but it is beyond his power to plunge one of them into perdition. Jeſus ſubmitted to the attacks of the tempter, to be the more inclined and prepared to ſuccour the ſouls of the tempted. It is a precious ſuitable promiſe, fitted to be an admirable remedy, and written for the faith of all ages: "God will not ſuffer you to be tempted above what you are able to bear, but will, with the temptation, make a way to eſcape."

3. We muſt viſit the needy with new ſupplies.

The poor are a ſpecies of property, claimed by the church, which we can never loſe, neither can we ceaſe watching over the heirs of calamity, with unwearied care. Race ſucceeds race,

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to inhabit the regions of wretchedneſs. The indigent may be neglected or oppreſſed, but cannot be obliterated from the face of the earth. How comfortleſs their condition! They have no fig-tree to bloſſom for them, no vine to yield its fruit; they have no field of their own to produce meat to them, and the labour of every olive fails; they have neither flock nor fold, neither herd nor ſtall. They cannot even claim, as their excluſive property, the cloth that defends their breaſt from the cold, or the cup that carries the water to their lips. If proſperity alone constitutes happineſs, they have nothing of it. But if happineſs conſiſts in a participation of Chriſt, in the poſſeſſion of contentment, in the kind communications of the humane, in having a ſhare of the pity, the prayers, the purſe of real Chriſtians, they may enjoy a larger portion of felicity, than falls to the lot of many of their richeſt neighbours.

Poverty is ſometimes the companion of people from the moment of their birth. The commencement of life is to them the morning of miſery. Their childhood is the cradle of all their adverſities, a ſad introduction to the deep ſcenes of ſorrow, that will certainly follow.

low. They are *born to trouble*, in the largeſt ſenſe of the expreſſion, and the unhappy birth-right they inherit in all its miſerable parts.

We ſee poverty too, able to overtake perſons who have once wallowed in prodigality. Perhaps they fondly hoped, this evil would never befal them, this plague would never come nigh their dwelling; but ſuddenly the fountains of their wealth are dried up, and the people who were accuſtomed to relieve, need to be relieved.

Suffer me to add, that poverty very often viſits men, amidſt the pains of ſickneſs, or the infirmities of age. It is no ſtrange or unjuſt event that hath happened unto them; yet to be attacked by the darts of indigence, when leaſt able to endure the aſſault, cannot fail to make them weary and faint in their minds. Sad victims! They ſuffer without murmuring; they weep without noiſe; they are ſorrowful without ſhew. How precariouſly they ſubſiſt! Poverty prevents them from purchaſing proper food; the want of proper food leaves them a prey to ſickneſs; ſickneſs increaſes their neceſſity; ſin works; nature fails; death cloſes the diſmal detail! Can they be permitted to ſink into the

grave,

grave, unpitied, unſolaced, unſupported? No; it would be a reproach to any people.

The eye of affluence, however, is too unwilling to look at the many pictures of human nature, that are depraved and miſerable. Fabulous accounts of the tribulations of mortals, are read with avidity, perhaps with floods of tears, while the depreſſed objects of real diſtreſs, are little regarded. It is natural to ſay, "Be ye warmed and clothed," but not ſo natural to give thoſe things that are neceſſary. We are more mindful of our own concerns, than of the wants of a poor Chriſtian. We are all egotiſts, exceedingly unwilling to ſcatter the bleſſings of benevolence, where any loſs is to be ſuſtained, or any riſk to be incurred. We ought never to forget, however, that no one lives to himſelf, and no one dies to himſelf. What did the rich man add to his wealth, his character, or comforts, by his refuſal to relieve Lazarus? He rather loſt than gained. He obtained nothing more than new bitterneſs to his laſt moments, and new thorns to his departing pillow.

It is matter of regret, that the perſons who are too much familiarized with ſcenes of wretched poverty, do not feel forcibly enough all the

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diſtinguiſhed ſenſibilities of religious ſympathy. I am apt to cavil at our common nature, when thoſe painful ſufferings of poverty, that ſhould awaken all the activity of tender compaſſion, and when the ſuperabundance of proſperity, that ſhould prompt men to relieve people ready to periſh, are found to have the contrary effect of producing complete careleſsneſs. The truth of the obſervation is ſo obvious, that I have ſcarcely ever ſeen the poor very ſympathizing with one another; and if the rich are frequently charitable, they are not always compaſſionate. The man who conveys no ſupport to his neighbour, amidſt his numerous neceſſities and diſtreſſes, knows that ſuch indifference is not eſteemed on earth. It is for this reaſon, he hides the real coldneſs of his heart, under the veil of an affected exceſs of warm expreſſions. But the tender mercies of the Chriſtian, incline him to embrace the whole afflicted world, as far as his means can, thinking nothing done, while any thing remains undone.

4. We muſt viſit the dying with divine delights.

The roll of mortality that God hath written, and attached to his own throne, contains the

names

naimes of all mankind. There can be no more an Enoch or Elijah, undecaying individuals on the earth, living in the high hope of being glorioufly tranflated. Man muft be parted into two, by the power of the laft meffenger, in order to be made eventually, a complete partaker of eternal perfection. The grave is the ancient, the fixed, the unchangeable road to glory. The day of our death, is infeparably connected with the day of our birth.

The periods of our exiftence do vary, to fuit the decrees and deigns of God, but all muft yield fucceffively to the influence of weakneſs, the power of decay, the law of diffolution. There is not more protection from the tomb, in the beauty of youth, or the vigour of manhood, than in the feebleneſs of infancy, or the drooping days of old age. We are moft earneftly exhorted to draw out bowels of mercies, when we have to deal with people about to quit the world.

Is the believer laid on the bed of death, loaded with outward diftreffes, or vexed with inward doubts? We muft withhold nothing, that will contribute to his intereft and comfort. It is true, the beft on earth is no better than his fathers,

fathers, and muſt die, but we can ſay to the righteous, it ſhall be well with him. He hath a God to apply to, who mingles his cup; a Mediator to rejoice in, whoſe croſs hath purchaſed a kingdom; a Spirit to look to, whoſe office it is to diffuſe joy with peace in believing; a word to conſult, whence infallible direction hath been drawn in all ages. What fountains of conſolation, ſtrong and full! How ſuperior the ſatisfaction, to all the pretended peace derived from heatheniſh conſolatory conſiderations, or from the largeſt ſhare of worldly poſſeſſions!

Perhaps there is a perſon in the act of departing, of a very different deſcription. Trouble ſeizes him in the midſt of a courſe of ſin. He is ſo far from being dumb, opening not his mouth, becauſe God does it, that he lifts up a ferocious voice, and rages againſt heaven. One might expect him to ſay, "I will bear the in-"dignation of the Lord, becauſe I have ſinned "againſt him." But, alas! though ſtricken, he is not grieved; though in danger of being conſumed, he refuſes to receive correction. He teareth himſelf in his anger. "But what will "all thy vexation avail? Is it not wiſer to be-

" wail thine own dead ſoul buried in ſin, than to be
" grieved that thou canſt aſſemble no more with
" wicked aſſociates? Is it not better to mourn
" over a loſt God, and a deſpiſed Saviour, whoſe
" favour thou haſt forfeited, than to be mourning
" over loſt health, or a ſinking world? Is there
" no comfort for thee? There is. Pardon and
" acceptance, however long neglected, are ſtill
" within thy reach. Know, that there are no
" cordials like thoſe, the covenant of grace con-
" tains. O covet without ceaſing, the know-
" ledge of Chriſt, the faith of his elect, the
" beauties of holineſs; and when death arrives,
" thou ſhalt not be like a ſoldier inexperien-
" ced until the inſtant of attack, or a traveller
" unprovided at the moment of entering on his
" journey." I proceed,

III. To conſider the obligations that bind us to ſhew to an afflicted holy kindred, all the feelings of a conſtant and active compaſſion.

1. We muſt pay regard to the ſick, in obedience to the precept of Heaven.

Men in ſpiritual affairs are not their own maſters. All are under authority. God hath a right to demand from us what duties he pleaſes,

pleaſes, and deſerves always to be followed as our ſupreme Director.

It is with all the power and compaſſions of a God that he pleads the cauſe of his own poor. His authority is ſweetened by affection; his voice is full of love. Let us open our ear to liſten to his law. "Learn to do well, ſeek judg-" ment, relieve the oppreſſed, judge the father-" leſs, plead for the widow. To do good, and " to communicate, forget not; for with ſuch " ſacrifices God is well pleaſed. The poor " ſhall never ceaſe out of the land; therefore I " command thee, ſaying, Thou ſhalt open thy " hand wide unto thy brother, to thy poor, and " to thy needy in thy land *."

Had we been commanded to prove our love to the poor, by being called to endure their diſtreſſes, or to die in their ſtead, we might have had ſome difficulty to comply. But when we conſider, we are ordered to do what we can eaſily perform, compliance becomes a pleaſure. We are deſired to give a little of what God hath given us; and ſhall we receive all, retain all, repay nothing? We are called to give what we can well ſpare; and ſhall we fare ſumptu-

ouſly,

* Deut. xv. 11.

ouſly, wallow amidſt ſuperfluity, while the ſick are denied crumbs? We are requeſted to give what we muſt ſoon part with forever; and ſhall we not ſeize the pleaſure of wiſely diſtributing to the neceſſitous, during the ſhort period that the powerful opportunity remains?

As the labour of giving hope to the ſick is no hardſhip, what can be more unreaſonable than to neglect it? Is God a Father; and ſhall his will be diſregarded by his ſons and daughters? Is he a Maſter; and ſhall his word be diſobeyed by his profeſſed ſervants? Is he witneſs of the whole of our walk; and ſhall he ſee none of thoſe ſympathizing acceptable deeds, with which his ſoul is divinely gratified? Is he final Judge; and ſhall he have no beneficent exertions of brotherly compaſſion to recognize or recommend in the judgment? Why make ſuch injurious ſuppoſitions? why not believe that you will multiply the acts of mercy?

Suffer me to finiſh this point, with the advice of the ſon of Sirach. "My ſon, defraud not "the poor of his living, and make not the "needy eyes to wait long. Make not a hungry "ſoul ſorrowful, neither provoke a man in his "diſtreſs. Add not more trouble to a heart

"that

" that is vexed, and defer not to give to him
" that is in need. Reject not the ſupplication
" of the afflicted, neither turn away thy face
" from a poor man *."

2. We muſt relieve the ſick in imitation of the example of our Mediator.

There have been many amiable patterns of ſympathy exhibited on earth, though all have not been equally excellent. A few of them have been praiſed, as if they were perfect, but the picture hath been beautified beyond the life. The beſt of ordinary men are made up of blemiſhes and imperfections, unable to ſhew us the whole of what is good, unworthy of being implicitly followed.

If men were to ſelect the beauties of many bleſſed noble characters, they might ſoon make an innocent, upright, untainted being. Put the faith of Abraham, the zeal of Elijah, the devotion of David, the wiſdom of Solomon, the perſeverance of Peter, and the love of John, into one perſon, he will require nothing more to make him perfect.

The perfection of Jeſus riſes inconceivably higher, comprehending more ornaments than all the

* Eccleſiaſticus iv. 1,—4.

the characters on earth can claim, ſtretching out to infinitude. There reſides in Chriſt a fulneſs of graces and virtues, that could dwell in no other perſon. There is nothing but what is "altogether lovely" in his example. There is a continued diſplay of the Father's tenderneſs, and of the Son's mercy in his life.

Our bleſſed Lord was a law to himſelf, able always to direct his own ſteps. Our fallen family never had ſo generous, ſo affectionate, ſo merciful a friend. His ſettlement on earth was formed in the midſt of liſts of ſick, where the circle of uſefulneſs might be continued or increaſed. Who can ſay in how many inſtances he was the healer of the diſeaſed, the deliverer of the poſſeſſed, the reſtorer of loſt happineſs? Who knows not that the ſickneſs and death of Lazarus coſt him tears, giving an occaſion alſo of exerciſing his glorious power? Who hath not read with what a tenderneſs of feeling, he recommended his aged mother to the pious attention of the deareſt of his diſciples?

It is not to be ſuppoſed, Chriſt confined the miniſtrations of his mercy, to the bodies of men. Woe to us, had his views been ſo narrowed! He made himſelf a ſervant to immor-

tal

tal ſouls. They appeared ſo ſupremely precious in his divine eſtimation, that he would hazard every thing dear to man, life not excepted, to procure their happineſs. It was no fruitleſs ill-concerted expedition he undertook, when he reſolved to reſcue men from the depths of miſery; it was one that was crowned with complete ſucceſs. He ſaved the millions whom he ſought to ſave. Contaminated by the fatal poiſon of ſin, with the whole head ſick, and the whole heart faint, ruined men could not be cured, but by a medicine made in heaven, and applied by the healing hand of the Mediator. The whole have no need of the Phyſician, but they that are ſick. Ephraim would have died of his ſickneſs, and Judah of his wound, had they been left to the ſkill of angels or men. But let the ſpiritual condition of men be the worſt that can be conceived, let them be blind and deaf, let them be broken and bruiſed, let them have no ſoundneſs or health, the blood of Jeſus, effectually applied, is the beſt balm, an univerſal remedy that hath never failed. O learn to carry the griefs of thoſe whom he carried in his boſom!

3. We

3. We muſt relieve the ſick, in conformity to the practice of the church.

The hiſtory of mankind is full of the proviſions, of the reſources, of the funds that have been prepared for the weak and the weary, the diſabled, and the decayed of the world. Every ſociety ſeems to have gloried in watching over its own ſick, with all the ardour of unwearied affection. Even armies have not neglected thoſe of their number who have been wounded or have ſickened in the very heat of the action. We believe, the temple of peace ſhall be as renowned for courteous offices, and all the acts of high generoſity, as the tent of war. The church knows how to continue nouriſhing her holy priſoners, and filling with ſuitable ſupplies the baſkets of indigence.

Survey the zealous charitable exertions of the Jewiſh church. The people were ordered to aſſign the corners of their fields to the uſe of the needy; and in order to avoid, to eſcape the frauds liable to be practiſed, it was determined to leave a ſixtieth part of the ground as a juſt proportion for the poor *. The ears of corn that happened to fall from their hand in time of

* Lev. xix. 9, 10.

of harveſt, were appropriated to the ſame beneficial end, and a writer * of their own nation aſſures us, that the Jews held themſelves obliged, not only to give to the deſtitute what had accidentally dropt, but to let fall ſome handfuls purpoſely for them to gather. This is not all. They had a right to the grape-gleanings of every vineyard, and every ſeventh year they were entitled to an unuſual ſhare of the goods of people of property. The modern Jews, though not equal to their anceſtors in the diſcharge of every duty, do not come behind them in relieving their poor. One of the greateſt ſcandals, which ſtrengthens all their prejudices againſt the Chriſtian religion is, the little charity exerciſed by Chriſtians; a ſcandal that once undoubtedly exiſted, a ſcandal that is almoſt entirely wiped away.

Mark the manners of the primitive Chriſtian church. Luke informs us, the diſciples had been enriched ſo much with the charitable diſpoſitions of their divine Maſter, that they had all things common, ſold their poſſeſſions, their goods, and parted to all men as every man had need. In the times of Tertullian, Chriſtian cha-

* Joſephus.

rity was proverbial; it is incredible what indefatigable pains and diligence were employed to ſuccour the children of ſorrow. Julian, juſtly ſtigmatized with the name of apoſtate, ſaid, "Let us conſider, that nothing hath ſo much "contributed to the progreſs of the doctrine of "Chriſtians, as their charity to ſtrangers." Indeed many primitive Chriſtian cities kept hundreds of people for the expreſs purpoſe of taking charge of the ſick. I cannot avoid mentioning, on the preſent occaſion, a charming intereſting paſſage of one of the fathers of the church. "Many of our brethren, neglecting "their own health, through an exceſs of chari-"ty, have brought upon themſelves the mala-"dies of others. After they had held in their "arms the dying ſaints, after they had cloſed "their mouths and their eyes, after they had "embraced, kiſſed, waſhed, and adorned them "with their beſt habits, after they had carried "them on their ſhoulders to the grave, they "have been glad themſelves to receive the "ſame kind offices from others who have imi-"tated their zeal and charity *."

Such

* Euſebius.

Such have been the ancient uſages. While we would have you to examine them, we dare not preſcribe to you preciſely, the meaſures of your duty. Jeſus himſelf hath fixed nothing, and how can we make limits? All we ſay is ſhort and plain, "Thou ſhalt love thy "neighbour as thyſelf."

4. We muſt compaſſionate the ſick from a deſire to advance the honour of religion.

A profeſſion of faith and ſanctity is good, but if not ſupported by a ſuitable practice, it is no better than a ſyſtem of ſolemn grimace and mockery. The man whoſe religion conſiſts in ſound, in ſhews, in ſighs only, has his religion yet to learn.

But the intereſts of piety are very much promoted when the Chriſtian unfolds a conſiſtent character. He muſt be maintaining in the courſe of his life, a right to all the high pretenſions to holineſs, to diſintereſtedneſs, to heavenly-mindedneſs, he hath made.

Our principles are not to be allowed to lie dormant; we muſt afford them opportunities of operating, by being arouſed to an affectionate activity. Do we confeſs that Jeſus is Lord to the glory of God the Father; and ſhall we not

gather

gather together in one the children of God that are ſcattered abroad? Have we taſted of the grace of the Higheſt; and ſhall we never ſhew good-will to men? Have we faith; and ſhall it never be allowed to work by love?

What are our vows, our engagements, our reſolutions, but ſo many obligations on us, to glorify Chriſt, and to bear the burdens of our brethren? We are brought to the teſt at preſent, to declare by our charitable deeds whether our words were ſincere, or whether they were only feigned. What more proper than that our agreements about good, ſhould be fulfilled, not falſified? What more pleaſing than to prove ourſelves friends to fidelity, ſtrangers to perfidy?

What are our prayers in favour of the ſick but ſo many motives, ſo many excitements to employ our ſkill, our ſubſtance, our exertions for their advantage? How are our deſires to be fulfilled but by the kind agency of mortals? Shall we ourſelves yet ſit ſtill and do nothing? Shall we leave it to other perſons to accompliſh all our petitions? Shall the whole labour and credit of the work be conſigned to a few volunteers in the cauſe of Chriſtian love, while

we

we reſolve to be mere ſpectators? Ah! what ſignifies a ſupplication that falls lifeleſs from our lips? How can we hope our deſires will have force enough to enter into the heavens, if they never diſpoſe us to ſtretch out our heart and hand to the hungry? Let us work for others as we would wiſh them graciouſly to work for us. Let us impart to them the beſt of thoſe ſpiritual, thoſe temporal benefits we poſſeſs. Away with indolence. Vindicate, by the abundance of your alms, the name and honours of Chriſtianity. I cannot help thinking, that with a view to his ſick ſaints, Jeſus ſays, as he does with regard to other points: "He "that is not with me is againſt me, and he that "gathereth not with me ſcattereth abroad."

The Conclusion.

1. We are convinced, that the exerciſe of compaſſion is ancient and honourable.

It is no new duty we are called to perform, confined to our own place and circumſtances, but one common to the early ages of Chriſtianity. Indeed there never was a period, and never will be on earth, in which we ſhall have

no

no need of bowels of compaſſion. From the opening to the end of the world, the viſitation of the ſick is an employment always neceſſary.

David furniſhes us with a pleaſing pattern. There were falſe witneſſes who rewarded him evil for his good, to the ſpoiling of his ſoul. "But as for me when they were ſick, my cloth-"ing was ſackcloth, I humbled my ſoul with "faſting, and my prayer returned into my own "boſom. I behaved myſelf, as though he had "been my friend or brother *."

The diſtreſſes and departure of Dorcas produced much weeping among all the widows. The ſickneſs of Epaphroditus threw Paul into much heavineſs, but had his companion in labour died, he would have had ſorrow upon ſorrow. Our joy and our grief riſes or falls with the welfare or the woes of the houſehold of faith.

2. We are aſſured, ſervices done to the ſick cannot paſs unnoticed or unrewarded.

It is an inviſible but active omniſcient Agent with whom we have to do. We cannot hide from him the compaſſion of our heart, or the charity

* Pſal. xxxv. 13, 14.

charity of our hand, however carefully concealed, or ſecretly exerciſed. Neither is Chriſt unconcerned about the exertions that are made, to feed with milk, or with meat, his real diſciples. He places all the habits of holy obedience, and all the actions of brotherly love, in the light of his countenance.

If the liberality of the believer cannot eſcape the eye, neither can it miſs the gratuitous praiſes of a gracious Divine Benefactor. In the work of mutual love, we are not labouring in vain, or ſpending our ſtrength for nought and in vain. It is true, I cannot promiſe you an increaſe of trade, or a ſucceſſion to an earthly eſtate, as the recompence of the favours you beſtow on the ſick. I cannot aſſure you, the ſuccour you give to ſuffering humanity, ſhall be followed with as many temporal benefits, as thoſe that were received by ancient Iſraelites whenever they proved obedient. But I have the authority of God to ſay, that the merciful ſhall obtain mercy, and that all the comforts contained in a promiſe of " the life that now is," ſhall be moſt certainly conveyed. Earthly intereſts may be more promoted than we imagine, becauſe, by charitable aſſociations, prejudices among

among religious perſuaſions are baniſhed, a godly emulation excited, and a kindly intercourſe produced.

Are we to be mere mercenary mortals, never diſpoſed to perform duty, but when we ſee the reward within our reach? No. It is not a ſelfiſh diſpoſition we wiſh to inculcate. Yet none of the leaſt motives to a holy brotherly obedience ought to be overlooked. We readily allow there are higher, more gracious rewards in ſtore in an unſeen land, than any that earth can yield. There is a delight in well-doing which will bear reflection, and cannot be deſtroyed. The world to come will be found full of pleaſures, and triumphs proportioned to the pains and toils of a preſent world. God cannot be forgetful of the holy gracious hire, to be given to thoſe labourers, who have refreſhed the feeble of his flock, and reaped down his fields. Thus, while the wiſe are receiving the bleſſing of him who is ready to periſh, they may have the aſſurance of ſhining as ſtars in the brightneſs of the firmament.

3. We are furniſhed with one reaſon why heaven is ſo much deſired.

The

The high inhabitants are eternally removed from all the ſickneſs of an earthly abode. We find in the better world, no pool with porches, where lie a great number of impotent folk, of blind, of halt, of withered, waiting for the moving of the water. There no centurion beſeeches Jeſus to heal a ſick ſervant, no nobleman to deliver a ſick ſon from death. There no child of woe can be ſeen, requeſting to be viſited. There we can neither hear complaint, nor need to exerciſe compaſſion.

As iniquity can never enter into the heavenly manſions, the bitter fruits of diſobedience can neither be known or reaped. None of the uncircumciſed or unclean aſſemble above; of courſe, ſickneſs, ſorrow, and ſighing, have fled away. They are ſaints alone, that having aſſumed their ſtation, ſing together in the heights of the heavenly Zion. O bliſsful ſociety, the ſweeteſt and the moſt ſolacing, the higheſt and the holieſt of all!

4. Much co-operation is due to thoſe whoſe voluntary office it is to leſſen the miſeries of the world.

Wherever we ſee a holy man devoting his beſt diſpoſitions and many of his days, his un-

derſtanding and his diligence to the relief of the ſick, we readily give him our applauſe, and cannot withhold our ſupport. It is to both, that he is entitled. He is the friend of heaven and earth. While increaſing in ſtature with God, it is right he ſhould be increaſing in favour with men. Bleſſed be God, we have many characters of this deſcription; and I believe no country can boaſt of a greater number of liberal inſtitutions, honourable for religion, and friendly to humanity, than Britain.

Some of them are purely ſpiritual, appointed to conſult, to maintain, to conſummate the beſt concerns of the ſouls of men. Some are temporal only, meant to prevent or to remove the ſufferings of nothing more than the body.

It is one of the peculiar advantages of the Society, for whoſe ſake and intereſt, I have the pleaſure of addreſſing you, that in their communications with the ſick, ſpiritual and temporal comforts are united. The ſouls of the deſolate are not neglected while their bodies are ſupplied. If they preſent a cup of cold water, they wiſh to be the inſtrument of making the perſon to whom it is given a diſciple. If they ſcatter around the bed of tribulation that

" bounti fulneſs

" bountifulneſs, which is as a fruitful garden," they take care, at the ſame inſtant, to point out the way of ſalvation.

But why inſiſt on this point? The object and utility of the inſtitution are well-known, generally acknowledged, highly approved. What is moſt material at preſent to mention is, that the funds of the Society are very much reduced. It was never intended to amaſs a large ſtock, but merely to have a floating ſum for annual uſe. The preſent application to your goodneſs and generoſity, to your faith and love, hath been deferred longer than was intended, ariſing from unavoidable occurrences that could not be prevented. If the delay hath created freſh embarraſſments in the finances of our valuable friends, I perſuade myſelf, the delay will be a new excitement to you, to make the greater exertions. I believe you have anticipated me in the earneſt call, I now make on your charitable contributions, and inſtead of needing " line upon line," to engage in the bleſſed work, you only want to ſee a lap where you may caſt in the Lord's loan. I know the forwardneſs of your mind, for which I boaſt of you, that you were ready long ago,

and

and your zeal hath provoked very many. The occaſion earneſtly deſired hath at laſt arrived. Miniſter to the ſaints. Sow bountifully, and you ſhall reap bountifully. Shew that you love much by giving much; and we will ſay, thanks to God for your numerous rich gifts.

I am not aſhamed to beg your alms, to ſupport the ſick, becauſe in this kind humble ſervice, we are encouraged by law and goſpel, by prophets and apoſtles. It is by your liberal diſtribution to them too, that you glorify God, and prove your profeſſed ſubjection to the goſpel of Chriſt. Ye who are rich, bring your ſilver or golden pieces, as you have many more than you ſhall ever need. Ye who have been relieved by the Society, and are planted in better circumſtances, teſtify your gratitude. Have mercy upon the afflicted. Be gentle towards them, even as a nurſe cheriſheth her children.

Does one ſay, "I am able to give ſo little, I "may as well withhold it?" Let there be no miſtake. Why not remember that a mite is noticed no leſs than a talent? It is but little indeed that any individual can do for the general intereſts of religion; but can all be in exer-

tion

tion, and the reſult not be glorious? Do not the alliances of Chriſtians in the cauſe of goodneſs augur well for the church? Think of the rearing of the tabernacle in the wilderneſs; every heart was open, every hand was active, materials were poured into the ſacred treaſury from every ſide, the work rapidly advanced, and did not the tent of Jehovah ſoon ſhine like a high palace? Learn the uſeful leſſon.

Does another ſay, "We can hardly pro-"vide for our own ſubſiſtence? We live in a "period ſo eventful, ſo critical, ſo full of ſerious "changes, that we ſhould not be unmindful of "laying up a little for futurity. Beſides, the "ſeaſon is ſingularly alarming, and late almoſt "beyond example. Providence frowns, ſpeak-"ing terrible things in righteouſneſs. The "ſummer is ended long ago, and the harveſt "hardly begun. The times are awful and "hard *." All thou haſt ſaid, my fellow diſciple, is a truth. But if the times be hard for thee, are they not harder for thoſe of thy brethren who have a worſe lot? You may not have much, but is not the condition of thoſe who

* A worſe harveſt had not been ſeen in the courſe of the century, followed by a ſevere ſcarcity.

who have nothing more to be pitied? If you ſpeak of the tumults of the univerſe, ſhould not the wall of Jeruſalem be built even in troublous times? With regard to ſome future diſtant period for which you would wiſh to provide, could you juſtify yourſelf to God or conſcience, to neglect the duty of to-day, for the ſake of meeting the events of to-morrow? If you have two coats, ought you not to give to him who hath none? If you know of ſupport for ſix days, ought you not to help him who knows not where to find the next meal?

I have ſpoken freely, and would to heaven ſo ſucceſsfully as to exceed expectation.

Permit me to propoſe one queſtion more, and my work is finiſhed. Is Jeſus in the midſt of us, or is he not? If he is, and you know him to be the Prince of life, would you not feed him when you ſaw him an hungred, would you not give him drink when thirſty, take him in when a ſtranger, clothe him when naked, and viſit him when ſick? Let me do you the juſtice and the honour to ſay you would. He is preſent, not perſonally indeed, but myſtically: give him the entertainment to which he is entitled. Liſten to his own language: "In

" as much as ye do it, to one of the leaſt of " theſe my brethren, you do it unto me."

Finally, beloved, if Jeſus be ſpiritually preſent in his ſanctuary, let us not only give him honour, but ſeek to receive honour from him in return. He loves to be employed. We are all ſick by nature; we need to be viſited. Let us commit our hearts to Chriſt, to be healed of whatſoever ſpiritual malady they have. Heavenly Phyſician, cure us, comfort us, enlarge our hearts; and we ſhall carry a box of precious ointment to thy poor, clouded, comfortleſs children! Let us, with unity of will, like fellow-workers, cordially lend our aid to every act of charitable labour. Let us ſay, " God hath ſpo-" ken in his holineſs, we will rejoice; the Lord " is our helper, we will not fear; the God of " heaven will proſper us: therefore we his ſer-" vants will ariſe and build."

THE END.

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